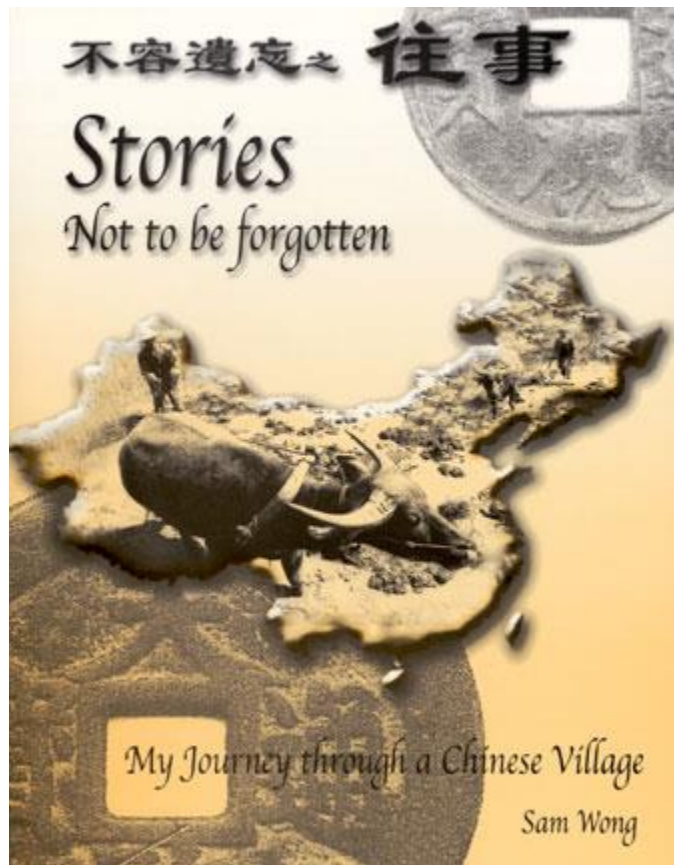


BOOK REVIEW

Stories Not To Be Forgotten: My Journey through a Chinese Village

By Sam Wong,
Library of Congress #2005904848,
Summer 2005, 216pp.
(Email: sampwong@hotmail.com)

As Reviewed by Stanton Jue



There is a plethora of "memoir" books these days, but this one is unique and different. In this book, Wong encompasses a range of topics depicting the cultural milieu, traditions and history, as well as his recollection of his childhood experience in a Taishan⁴ village and in Hong Kong during the '30s and '40s. In his research, he delved deep into classic historiography where he traced his familial roots to the B.C. era. Over the centuries, his Wong clan migrated from Henan to Fujian and eventually settled in Taishan County in Guangdong Province.

Looking at the cover, however, a casual reading of the title of this book can be misleading, for one would conjure up another recitation of atrocities committed in wartime China when thousands of Chinese citizens suffered or

witnessed the horrors, heinous crimes and violence. This book is just the opposite.

Early in the book (p.3), Wong cites the following Ancestor's Instructions:

Venture forth to seek a new horizon.

Establish moral rules wherever you settle.

Future foreign lands become your homeland.

Other countries will be your mother country.

For days and nights, don't forget my instructions.

Burn incense to honor ancestors at dawn and dusk.

Heaven will bless and protect you.

My twenty-one sons should be prosperous.

Prior to World War n, according to Sam Wong, most Taishanese, along with their

compatriots in nearby counties in Guangdong migrated to North America not as immigrants, but as sojourners or temporary workers with the sole purpose of seeking a better life. Once the single Chinese male had acquired enough wealth, he would return to his village, get acquainted with the family and relatives for a period of time and get married before coming back to America. This practice persisted for a long period. At the immigration office, his reporting of multiple children born in China, mostly boys, was a source of creating a "paper son" phenomenon upon which many young Cantonese boys came to the United States before and after the war.

In many respects, this violates the ancestor's edict, as cited above, by not heeding the advice of making "future foreign lands your homeland and other countries your mother country." However, since the beginning of the second half of the 20th century, most Chinese Americans have followed the ancestral advice close to heart by making America their homeland.

Throughout the discourse, Wong vividly describes in folklore and anecdotes many aspects of Chinese life in the United States, the family associations, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolence Association, the Organization of Chinese Americans, as well as his family tree, the village life in Taishan and education in Hong Kong during the Japanese occupation of China.

I was thrilled to read about the old Cantonese customs and celebrations — New Year parties, various festivals in the Lunar calendar, the vignettes that I was not familiar with. I found them fascinating and interesting. Indeed, I learned a great deal from reading Sam Wong's stories about the wedding banquets, baby parties, funerals, superstitions, lucky numbers, working on the farm, Chinese medicine, village schools, etc. The narratives which he relates in detail are insightful and informative, though, I am sure, these stories may be told differently from other parts of China.

The book is well illustrated with photos, maps and graphics. Wong wrote this book primarily for his children and grandchildren so they would know the hardships endured by their ancestors in China and a little about recent history. In my view, the book is full of information beneficial to all Chinese Americans who are curious about their ethnic roots.

Highly readable, enlightening. I recommend it.

The reviewer, Stanton Jue, is a U.S. Foreign Service Officer, retired, who served for over 30 year, mostly in East Asia and the Pacific and in Washington. His main professional focus has been Chinese affairs from the Cold War, through normalization of relations, to China's recent rise as a global economic player.